



Lifeblood

Tom Price

Artist: Manic Street Preachers

Album title: Lifeblood

Band members: Nicky Wire, James Dean Bradfield, Sean Moore

Record label: Sony

Release Date: 1 November 2004

[Image]

Buy *Lifeblood* from Amazon.co.uk or from Amazon.com

Lifeblood is a sophisticated and densely packed fusion of ideas. The first track on the album is called *1985*. We'll concentrate on this song - not without mentioning the others, but because *1985* displays some observations that are so fascinating you'll be intrigued by its perceptive depth. *1985* doesn't hold back either:

In 1985, In 1985

So God is dead like Nietzsche said
superstition is all we have left
circle the wagons we're under attack
We've realised there's no going back

The lyric, 'So God is dead like Nietzsche said,' is a direct reference to Nietzsche's story of a madman who bursts into the marketplace in the early morning crying, 'Where has God gone? . . . We have killed him - you and I . . . The tremendous event is still on its way, still travelling - it has not yet reached the ears of men' (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). *1985* refers directly to the redundancy of sad Welsh chapels and links this observation to the death of God.

The intellectual landscape, back in 1985, was a new and unfamiliar no-mans land. During the

1960s, the 'Death of God' movement - an academic movement which attempted to remove any trace of God from theology and philosophy - had been highly fashionable. Nobody had really proved that God didn't actually exist, but indirectly, through theories of knowledge, ethics and linguistics, all talk about God, or descriptions of what God is like, were attacked, ridiculed and sidelined. Although this movement, and its attempt to reduce everything to meaninglessness, was losing academic steam during the late 70s and 80s, the ideas themselves were still filtering into popular culture through various songs, plays, films and other art forms. Consequently the Manic Street Preachers, like so many of us, grew up under the impression that it wasn't intellectually credible to believe in God, or that talk about God could be truly meaningful. 'Suspicion is all we have left,' say the Manic Street Preachers. The traditionally held belief in God, at all, was dead.

1985 mentions other aspects of the eighties too such as Torville and Dean. Bradfield sings, 'In 1985 / Orwell was proved right.' Orwell's book *1984* warned that humanity may, in its' quest for a better society, end up creating a society with serious problems at its core. Orwell was worried that people might give up too much civil liberty in order to achieve an orderly society; that the price - the freedom of the people - was a crazy and terrifying price to pay.

It wouldn't be fair to say that the song *1985* is just about Orwell, Nietzsche or empty and redundant Welsh chapels. This is a song about the Manics' roots and 'the feeling of melancholy that drew them together' (uk.sonymusic.co.uk/manics). With unreserved honesty they are sharing some of the things that concerned them in 1985. Nicky Wire says, 'It was a pivotal year for us. The year we came together as four young people, formulated all our ideas, started listening to the same records, started watching the same films, reading the same things, looking the same way. It wasn't necessarily the year we started making music but it was the year we started making our own world' (*Xfm Lifeblood*).

Lifeblood is also much broader than *1985*. The Manic Street Preachers don't seem content with just explaining what they are unhappy with. There is a sense that Bradfield, Wire and Moore are being remarkably candid about how they have

coped with the disappearance of the fourth bandmate Ritchey Edwards, who vanished without a trace in 1995. They now seem to be saying that they're glad to be in a place of dealing honestly with their emotions and pains, but that you shouldn't let your emotions and pains rule you. This is the unmistakable message of *Lifeblood*. While most of their albums have been brimming with quotes and reflections, *Lifeblood* has just one - and it's one of the most insightful and profound observations so far in their careers, even more so when it's set in the context of what 1985 is trying to suggest.

The background has been painted in by 1985: God is dead; humanity is alone in the universe, without hope of rescue, value or significance. And what do the Manic Street Preachers do? They quote Descartes: 'Conquer yourself rather than the world.' But is this a case of projecting onto the Manic Street Preachers something that they don't intend to say? Not at all. In an interview in *The Guardian*, Wire is as clear as day regarding their intentions with this quote. 'That's where we are now,' says Wire. 'Twelve years ago we'd have said, conquer the world and f*** yourself.' (*The Guardian*, 1 Oct, 2004)

I'm hearing echoes of Sartre here: 'We are abandoned by God, left alone without excuse, to interpret alone such signs as there are. Even when we seek advice, it is we who choose who to ask. We must despair of help from outside our will, or beyond the possibilities of action. Descartes said, "Conquer yourself" and meant the same - that we should act without hope' (Jean Paul Sartre). In 1985, 'All we have is suspicion.'

At the heart of the message of 1985, then, is the idea that God is dead. Quite a lot of people find the Manics depressing, but they are poets and observers who challenge our tranquillised familiarity with the world. The Manic Street Preachers' analysis in 1985 - that if God really is dead then this must affect everything else - is also one of the observations made by a fascinating thinker called Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer used the metaphor of a two storied building. On the top floor where we live, we are happy to talk about things like right and wrong, freedom, justice, fairness, truthfulness. The top floor is supported by the floor under it, and now in our culture the foundation itself, our source of these things - the

God who is there - has been killed. And yet we act as if the foundation is still intact: we jump straight up to the top floor and naively pretend that nothing has changed. We then continue to use things like 'right' and 'good' without really having any grounding or justification for them (see Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* and *Escape from Reason*).

Now they come back to us and say clearly and openly that we must 'conquer ourselves.' This message is timely. The battle is ours, the war under our own skin. Yet, inner transformation? Isn't that the slogan of American self-help experts who bleed every broken and hungry soul for every penny they can get? Easy as it is to write off, there is something in us that must be conquered. Some kind of battle still to be fought and won. It's all very well to talk about the trouble out there in the world, but what about the trouble in here? Conquer yourself, say the Manics.

Interestingly, in 2002, the Manic Street Preachers released a song without an album called *There by the Grace of God*, which has a decidedly different feel to 1985. Wire doesn't wait for you to dream up your own interpretation: 'The key line is, "With grace we will suffer, with grace we will recover," so there's quite an optimistic sentiment to it: suffering can be overcome, which is quite an un-Manics sentiment I suppose.' Wire has a penetrating mind, and he is clearly a man who thinks deeply about the world and religion. He asks, 'Are the remnants of religion any more laughable than the Gods - drugs, popstars, footballers, even science - we believe in today?' (uk.sonymusic.co.uk/manics)

The Manics have been on a journey, leaving 1985 behind them. In 1985 God was dead, but now perhaps they're not so sure. Now they reflect that there may be some truth to these things that had been thrown away. That's a challenge to all of us. We might see that there is a battle to be fought inside ourselves, and that's one thing - but thinking we can fight it all on our own is another thing entirely. The battle to conquer ourselves will begin not with wrestling alone with ourselves, but with allowing him to help us. Freedom isn't something that we grasp for ourselves within, freedom is something that is given to us from without.

© Copyright Tom Price (2004)